

The Road Builder

By Nick Hershenow

Excerpts

I.

This morning Uncle Pers rose out of his deathbed to join us for tea.

We hear him shuffling out of the dark cluttered recesses of his house. We hear the slow thumping of his walker in the hallway, and when the thumping pauses we hear his rattling breaths. Then he emerges into the sitting room, blinking and squinting like some pale wrinkled creature of the underground, stopping to shade his eyes against the light reflected off the pastel buildings and the bay and the arid blue sky.

“His will to live is phenomenal!” Aunt Mavis says emotionally, though exactly what emotion she is expressing is hard to say.

I should clarify “deathbed.” He has been lying there for weeks, but it became clear some time ago that he was not about to die in it. And now he is up and coming to tea. But no one is fooled into thinking that the deathwatch is over. Uncle Pers is old and very sick, and any recovery he makes will be short-lived; within day, weeks at best, he’ll be having tea in bed again, and it can’t be long before he dies there.

Per stops, leaning hard on the walker and glaring at Mavis. “And why do you assume that my will has anything to do with it?”

“Because you have reason to live! Because you have work to finish!” She glares back, nods shortly, smoothes his shock of thin white hair, and give a pat, or a slap, on his unshaven cheek. Mavis is old too but you have to look closer to see it. She’s fit and ruddy, and always dressed as if for some special occasion, if only a costume party. Today she’s wearing a slithering kimono thing and a sort of headdress streaming silk and ribbons, and the scent of some exotic woodsap hangs in the air in her wake. She helps Pers into his chair and joins Kate in the kitchen preparing the things for tea.

I should clarify “tea”. We have tea twice a day, at ten o’clock and three o’clock, but in fact we never actually have *tea*. We have coffee, mineral water, juice, wine, beer, gin, brandy—almost anything *except* tea. But tea is what we call it. With tea we also have food, though not the kind that satisfies hunger and sustains life. We eat delicate things, the foodstuffs of ritual and illusion: tiny sculptures and still lifes that crunch once or twice, then disappear in the mouth like vapors and resonate in the stomach like dreams.

II.

Outside we could hear the grinding of the mill, the rough laughter of soldiers, children playing on the path and the Nakahosas' voice crossing the water. So the static world continued as before. Yet somewhere in the back of my mind I keep thinking how volatile we are. How we must contend with forces we can never reckon with. How on one night, knowing Kate was out in a midnight torrent wild and drunk and sleeping on the floors of huts in villages steeped in sorcery and blood feuds, I could sleep untroubled, secure in the sense of her presence beside me bed. And how another night she could drive a Land Rover home and I could wake in the morning with her sleeping beside me and now know what to make of her presence at all. How I could put my hands all over her and never contain her. Never even interpret her. How her skin was full of messages, how everything she was thinking and feeling came through her skin in languages of texture and temperature and moisture and vibration and scent, but that didn't mean I could understand those languages. Or that the languages even kept the same meaning, that they weren't volatile and changeable themselves.